

D E S C R I P T I O N

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Title

MULTIPLE DEVICE COMMUNICATIONS

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Background of the Invention

The present invention provides simple, fast, efficient and flexible communications apparatus, method and protocol between a plurality of electronic devices communicating over a common medium in a communications system.

Prior designs and existing communications apparatus and methods have distinct drawbacks. Some use master-slave protocols that are simple but inefficient. Some use multiple access protocols that allow collisions requiring either complex hardware or software. Some use token passing protocols that are both inefficient and complex. Operations in either or both master/slave or peer-to-peer communications modes are desirable over an extended product lifetime.

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Summary of the Invention

It is an object, feature and advantage of the present invention to avoid the problems and restrictions present in prior designs and available industry communications protocols.

It is an object, feature and advantage of the present invention to provide operation in either or both master/slave and peer-to-peer communications modes over an extended product lifetime.

It is an object, feature and advantage of the present invention to provide simple, automatic bus control sharing between devices. It is a further object, feature and advantage of the present invention to include the capability to add bus control features to all devices to allow master-less operation.

It is an object, feature and advantage of the present invention to provide a communications protocol where a unique byte code is detected by low level hardware, firmware or software to identify the end of one device's message.

It is a further object, feature and advantage of the present invention that the unique byte code, upon detection, cause an inherent change in bus control. It is a further object, feature and advantage of the present invention that the use of a simple byte code accomplishes a sequence of bus control transfers with only a single byte and minimum bus timing needs being met.

It is an object, feature and advantage of the present invention to provide a communications protocol that is simple. It is a further object, feature and advantage of the present invention that that bus control transfers use a simple

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mechanism requiring only the interpretation of an eight bit
code and sequential action based on the operation of a typical
UART. It is a further object, feature and advantage of the
present invention that the protocol be efficient in requiring
5 little overhead for bus control requirements. It is a still
further object, feature and advantage of the present invention
that the protocol be fast and transfer bus control to each
device after minimal delay. It is another object, feature and
advantage of the present invention that the protocol be
10 flexible in allowing very simple functions and messages to be
constructed using minimal microcomputer resources while also
allowing more complex messages provided by computers with more
resources. It is another object, feature and advantage of the
present invention that master/slave and peer-to-peer operation
15 coexist within a common communications protocol. It is a
further object, feature and advantage of the present invention
that polling can be implemented within that protocol.

The present invention provides a device
communications. The device communications comprises: a
20 plurality of communicating devices; a communications media
communicably connecting the plurality of devices; and a
sequential identifier for each of the plurality of devices.
The identifier provides a unique identity for each device and
provides a sequence order for all of the plurality of devices.
25 The device communications also comprises: a unique code; and a
protocol wherein each device transmits the unique code on the
communications media in the sequence order if the device has
nothing to report, transmits the sequence identifier of another
device followed by data followed by the unique code if the

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5 The present invention also provides a method of
communications for a communications bus communicably connecting
a plurality of communications devices. The method comprising
the steps of: assigning an identifier and a sequence order to
each of the multiplicity of devices; transmitting, continuously
10 and in sequence order, a message on the bus from each of the
multiplicity of devices; and terminating each message with a
unique code. The message comprises the unique code alone if
the device has no other message to transmit. The message
comprises the identifier for another device and the unique code
15 if the transmitting device desires to move elsewhere in the
sequence order. The message comprises the identifier for
another device, data and the unique code if the transmitting
device has a report to make.

The present invention further provides a method of communicating between a plurality of devices communicably connected by a communications medium. The method comprising the steps of: sequencing the plurality of devices into a sequence order; transmitting a message on the communications medium from one of the plurality of devices having communications control over the communications medium; receiving the message from the communications medium at each of the plurality of devices; determining, at each of the plurality of devices, if the message is: a unique code, or a combination of a sequence identifier and a unique code; incrementing communications control to the next device of the plurality of

devices in the sequence order if the message is the unique code; and transferring communications control to a device identified in the sequence identifier if the message is a combination of the sequence identifier and the unique code.

5 The present invention still further provides a communications protocol for a communications bus wherein messages are transmitted to a plurality of devices communicating by means of a bus. Each message includes a unique code indicating the end of the message and that same
10 unique code triggers a transfer of communications control to another device of the plurality of devices.

Brief Description of the Drawing

15 Figure 1 is a block diagram of a communications system to which the present invention is applicable.

 Figure 2 is a block diagram of a transmission of the unique byte code of the present invention as implemented on a communication system such as that shown in Figure 1.

20 Figure 3 is a block diagram of a bus message in accordance with the present invention transferring communications control in a non-sequential manner.

 Figure 4 is a block diagram of a bus message in accordance with the present invention transferring data in a
25 communications system of Figure 1.

Detailed Description of the Invention

30 Figure 1 shows a communications system 10 including a communications medium 12 such as a communications bus 14. The bus 14 is preferably implemented in the form of a flat, four wire ribbon cable using standard universal asynchronous

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receiver/transmitter (UART) resources for eight bit communications where two of the four wires provide power and common connections and the other two of the four wires provide communications using conventional RS-485 protocol. Although
5 described in terms of a flat ribbon connector and RS-485, a person of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that the communications media 12 can be implemented in a wide variety of manners including wireless communications, spread spectrum RF communications, fiber optic media, coaxial cable, and other
10 communications connectors using a variety of protocols appropriate for the media.

The communications media 12 communicably and operably interconnects a plurality of electronic devices 20, 22, 24 and 28. These devices 20, 22, 24, 28 are arranged into
15 a sequence order where each device 20, 22, 24, 28 has a sequence identifier providing both an identity and a place in the sequence order. In the case of the device 20, the identifier and place are the whole number "1"; in the case of the device 22 the identifier and place are the whole number
20 "2"; in the case of the device 24 the identifier and place are the whole number "3"; and so on through the device 28 which has the identifier and last place in the sequence order as indicated by the letter "N". By linking the place in the sequence order with the device identifier, it is simple to
25 increment through the sequence order device by device. However, a person of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that the identifier and the place in the sequence order can be distinct and linked in any conventional manner. Additionally, although the present invention contemplates incrementing from

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device to device by adding the value 1 when transferring bus control, a person of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that more complicated sequences will also achieve the same result.

5 The present invention combines master/slave and peer-to-peer communications modes into the communications system 10 by providing a communications message which works in a round robin format but has an end of transmission handoff allowing sequential or non-sequential changes in the order of
10 handoff. This is accomplished through the use a unique termination code such as a unique code 18. The unique code 18 is preferably implemented as a single byte with a specified value, but could be implemented as a multi-byte code, or as a group of unique codes. For purposes of this application, all
15 such approaches are defined as the unique code 18.

 The unique code 18 is detected by low level hardware, software or firmware to identify the end of a message transmitted by one device, for example device 20, and cause an inherent change in bus control to the next device 22 in the
20 sequence order. In the present invention, the sequence order is incremented by whole number addition from device 1 to device 2 to device 3 and so on to device N whereupon the sequence restarts at device 1. The plurality of devices 20, 22, 24, 28 are preferably placed in a sequence order at the time of system
25 configuration; the sequence order, as noted, running from device 1 through device N and then restarting at device 1.

 Device 1 would normally commence with communications control over the communications media 12. If device 1 had no commands or data to transmit or request, device
30 1 would transmit the unique code 18 on the communications media 12 to all of the plurality of devices 20, 22, 24, 28 in the

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form of a message 32. Each device 20, 22, 24, 28 receives the message 32 on the communications media 12 and determines if the message 32 is the unique code 18 by itself, or a combination of a sequence identifier 42 and a unique code 18, or a combination of a sequence identifier 42, data 46, and a unique code 18. In the message 32, the unique code 18 always is the message terminator and the type or nature of the message 32 is determined, in part, by the length of the message 32 preceding the unique code 18. If the message 32 is of a short length, the message is solely the unique code 18, and each device 20, 22, 24, 28 will recognize that communications control over the communications media 12 should be transferred to the next device 20, 22, 24, 28 in the sequence order. If the devices 20, 22, 24, 28 are sequenced by whole numbers, this transfer of control is accomplished by adding 1 to the sequence identifier 42 of the device currently controlling bus communications.

If the message 32 is an intermediate length message, the message includes a sequence identifier 42, and each device 20, 22, 24, 28 will recognize the sequence identifier 42 and substitute that newly recognized sequence identifier 42 as and into communications control of the communications media 12 thereby moving elsewhere in the order of sequence order. The sequence identifier 42 can be considered to identify the next device or node to assume communications control.

If the message 32 is a longer length message, the message 32 includes data 46 providing a command, or reporting information, the device 20, 22, 24, 28 will act upon that data 46 if it is relevant to the particular device and then transfers control to the device identified in the sequence identifier 42. Each message 32 will transfer communications

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control to either the next device in the sequence order or will transfer control to another device elsewhere in the sequence order, depending upon whether the message 32 is respectively the unique code 18, or a sequence identifier and unique code 18.

Figure 2 is a block diagram 30 of a message 32 on the communications media 12. This message 32 is clearly the shortest of the three message formats shown in Figures 2-4. The message 32 in this case is the unique code 18. This unique code 18 can be representative of a SYNC byte and is preferable, but not necessarily, an eight bit code which can easily be interpreted by a typical UART. It is also preferable that the unique code 18 be a single byte to provide for fast or best communications. A person of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that two or more preselected codes could be used in place of a single unique code and still achieve similar results.

Figure 3 is a block diagram 40 of a message 32 on the bus wherein the message includes a sequence identifier 42, the unique code 18, and, potentially, data security information 44.

Figure 4 is a block diagram 50 of a message 32 on the communications media 12 wherein the message includes a sequence identifier 42, data 46 such as a command, or a report providing change of state or status information, the security data 44 and the unique code 18 at the end of the message 48. This message 32 is clearly the longest of the three message formats shown in Figures 2-4.

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What has been described is a communications protocol which combines master/slave and peer-to-peer communications modes in a fast, flexible, efficient and simple manner. A person of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that many changes and modifications are possible through such a system. All such changes and modifications are contemplated to fall within the spirit and scope of the claimed invention.

What is desired to be secured for Letters Patent of the United States is set forth in the following claims.